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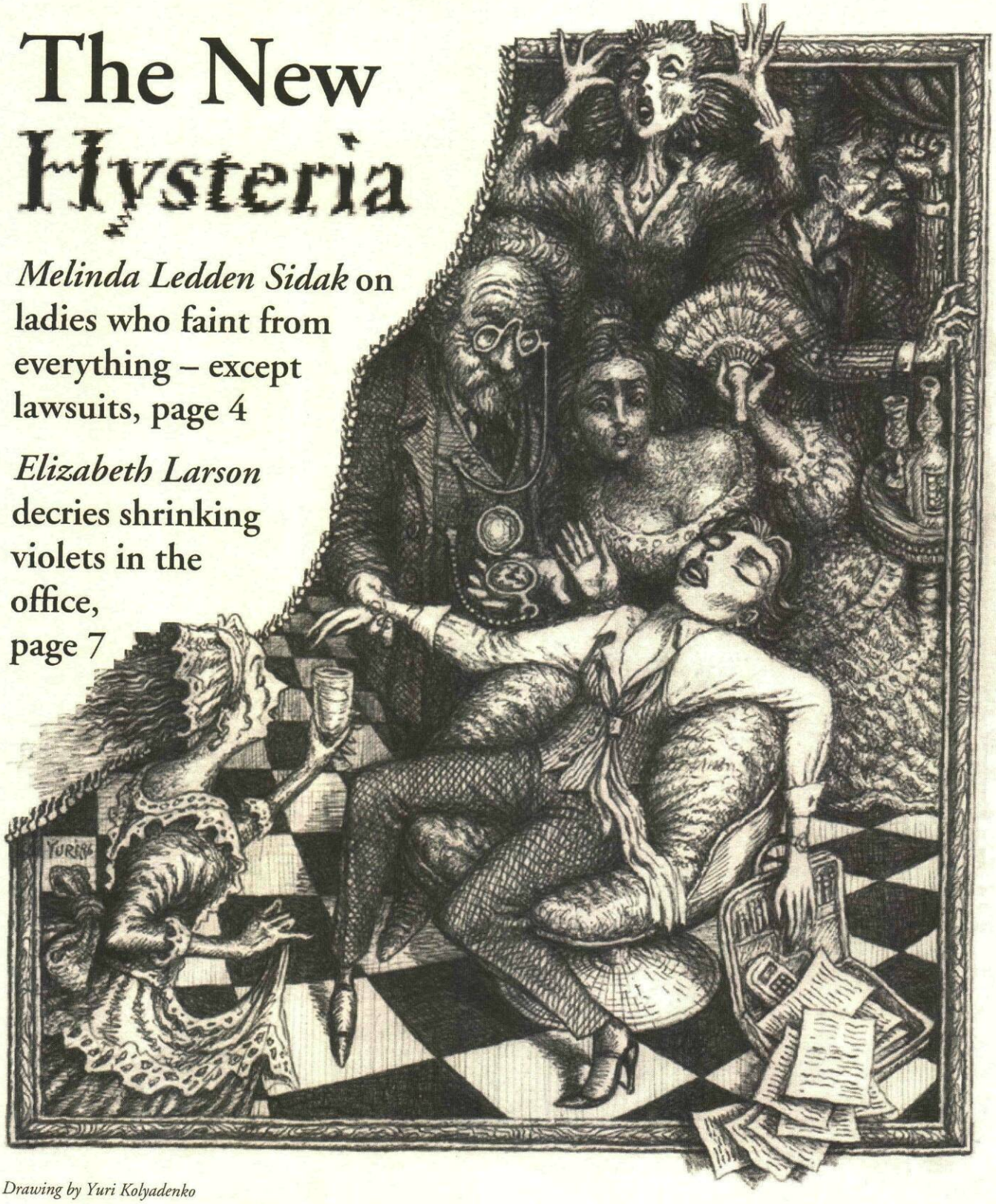
The Women's Quarterly

The New Hysteria

Melinda Ledden Sidak on ladies who faint from everything – except lawsuits, page 4

Elizabeth Larson decries shrinking violets in the office, page 7



Drawing by Yuri Kolyadenko

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Diary

Jane Austen, Pundit

Despite the enormous revival of interest in Jane Austen's novels, no one has noticed how much Austen has to tell us about the 1996 presidential race. I'm convinced that if Jane Austen herself were revived — say as a guest on "Larry King Live" — she could explain the polls that show women by a wide margin intend to vote for President Bill Clinton over Bob Dole.

Pollsters have attributed this gender gap to the belief among women that the President and his party are more compassionate, particularly towards the poor. I don't think Jane Austen would be much surprised. Vexed, yes, but not surprised. As she might note, few if any of the women surveyed actually know very much about the two men; their opinion is based entirely upon the images they see on TV. Clinton is warm, moist-eyed, and famously unembarrassed by the trembling of his lower lip. In contrast, the cement-faced Bob Dole is so uncomfortable expressing any personal feeling that he speaks of himself in the third person. This propensity to equate the *expression* of feeling with true feeling is the female failing that so often leads Austen's heroines into trouble. Nearly all her books can be read as warnings against such feminine gullibility.

As with Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen would urge us not to judge Dole too quickly by his stiff demeanor. She would want to know more: what private acts of kindness has he committed? Do his friends admire him? Does his housekeeper share their good opinion? Will he do something he believes is right even if — as it did for Dole, who fought bravely in a war he initially opposed — it exposes him to danger? It is only when we know these aspects of a character that we should begin to judge it.

On the other hand, Austen would warn CNN viewers to regard the President's emotional displays with suspicion. He all too closely resembles any number of her cads. Is he not a perfect Mr. Willoughby? Willoughby, remember, was the dashing fellow in *Sense and Sensibility* who rescued Marianne Dashwood from a fall. He courted her for a summer by magically anticipating her interests, reading poetry with her, and heavily implying marriage while not exactly promising it. Then he vanished. The next time Marianne saw him, he humiliated her by acting as if his behavior had given her no reason whatsoever to have any expectations of him. Women who accept Mr. Clinton at face value should take heed.

Not — as Austen would charitably add — that we should altogether condemn women for their misperceptions. Even wise Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, was temporarily thrown by the easy openness of her nogoodnik cousin, Mr. Elliot. The Dole campaign might, however, want to remind women of Anne's final verdict: "[He] was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father's house, he pleased them all.... She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than those whose tongue never slipped."

This, then, is Jane Austen's great insight into the gender gap. A man with problems is catnip to women. He doesn't have to be handsome or rich. All he need do is show his vulnerability, and beg a woman's help for his reform. When President Clinton lets that lip tremble and pleads for the support of the American public in withstanding the Republican's mean-spirited agenda, women clearly swoon. Unfortunately, I can't imagine a Republican candidate standing to the side like one of Austen's stoic male characters, helpless to stop the female public from foolishly hurling itself at a bounder. Perhaps that's why, despite it going against everything in his nature, we are hearing so much these days about Mr. Dole's war wounds.

"Yet does Clinton's behavior actually translate into marriage — or female votes?" Larry King might now impatiently ask his guest. Not necessarily, Austen might reply. For as she also demonstrated in her novels, women have as shrewd an instinct for the bottom line as men. If women vote for Clinton, it is probably because the programs Clinton supports (like welfare) tend to benefit women more than they do men. This same argument could also lead other women — who stand to gain from tax cuts, etc. — to vote Republican.

After all, Jane Austen was never so much a romantic as to permit her heroines to fall in love with any man who didn't also have a few hundred pounds a year to live on. The romantic Marianne Dashwood did, in the end, resign herself to marrying a dull but worthy war hero who could offer her a nice estate.

– Danielle Crittenden

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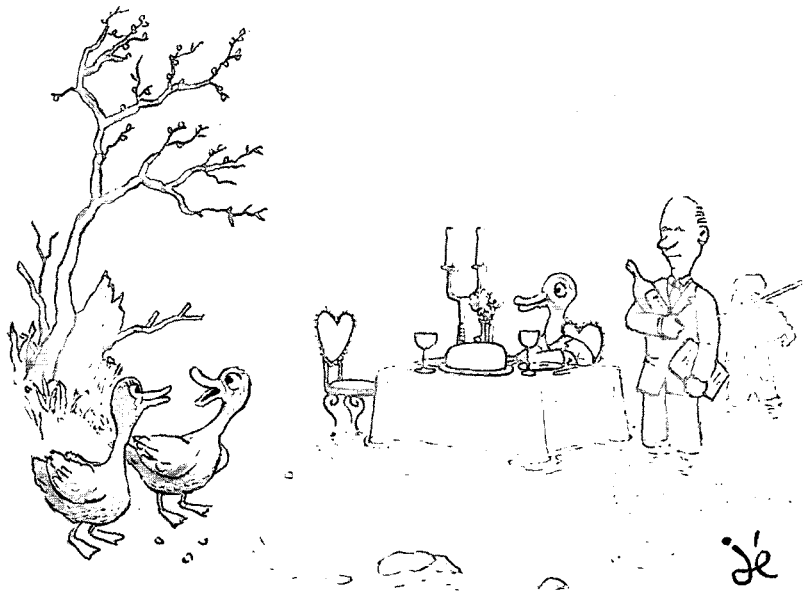

"You've got to admit, he has a very impressive courtship display."

Cartoon by Charles Jaffé

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The New Hysteria

Fainting Ladies

They shrink from everything except lawsuits. And don't pass them smelling salts, warns *Melinda Ledden Sidak*

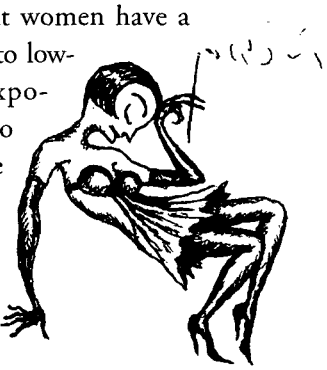
LAST YEAR A sad notice appeared in an issue of the *New Reactor*, the magazine for the environmentally sensitive. Under the headline "Two More Friends Decide It's Time to Go," the magazine reported that Lesley Hughes "ended her life in mid-February. Lesley was poisoned by benzene and photographic chemical exposures. Friends who love her should know that she spent her last hours quietly and loved." Prior to her death, Hughes had published a series of articles in the *Gay and Lesbian Times* about the condition that allegedly drove her to take her own life: Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS).

While the majority of those purporting to suffer from MCS — which doctors have nicknamed "twentieth-century disease" — do not resort to suicide, many are driven to bizarre extremes in their efforts to escape from the substances they believe are slowly poisoning them. Peggy Magidson, for example, abandoned her New York City apartment to live in the woods of upstate New York. Others have moved to steel and porcelain-lined trailers in the southwestern desert. Sufferers of MCS, like Magidson, report a wide variety of symptoms, including mental confusion, nausea, headaches, heart palpitations, joint pain, irritability, and insomnia. Some believe that the onset of their symptoms coincides with exposure to any one of a number of common substances, including perfume, air fresheners, cleaning products, pesticides, and petroleum products. Other sufferers have blamed more exotic agents, such as fireworks, the ink in books and periodicals, salty licorice, and toothpaste. Some think their symptoms are provoked by certain types of behavior, such as crying, being tired, talking too long, being in an overheated room, or sitting in front of a computer screen or television. Most patients, though, identify no specific set of triggering circumstances.

Like AIDS victims, MCS patients and the self-described "clinical ecologists" who treat them have established support groups, hot lines, journals, and clinics. They have organized politically to press for ordinances banning the wearing of fragrances and the use of pesticides. Aided and abetted by plaintiffs' lawyers quick to detect new sources of lawsuits, MCS groups have pressured government agencies and the courts to recognize MCS as a disability under all state workers' compensation plans, as well as state and federal handicapped and disability laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Consequently, the national press has recently begun running stories about MCS, some treating it as a joke, others warning about the social costs of frivolous lawsuits and misdiagnosis of what are essentially psychiatric problems, and still others accepting uncritically the assertions of MCS patients and clinical ecologists. What none of these stories have explored, however, is the oddity that the overwhelming majority of MCS patients are women. And they are typically white, well-educated women in their thirties with an above average socioeconomic status.

RESEARCHERS HAVE BEEN unable to determine conclusively why there is such a marked difference between the sexes among MCS patients, but speculation abounds in the scientific literature. One theory is that women have a different response to low-level chemical exposure, but to date no clinical evidence has supported that hypothesis. What's much more plausible is that MCS is "simply



Drawings by Yuri Kolyadenko

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the contemporary cultural expression of psychosomatic illness," as one medical journal put it. In other words, MCS — like a variety of other vaguely defined ills with similar characteristics from which women disproportionately suffer — is simply the latest incarnation of an old disease: hysteria.

Remember hysteria? While the condition dates back to the ancient Greeks, it most notoriously afflicted upper middle-class women in the nineteenth century. Like MCS, reported symptoms of hysteria included almost every possible physical and mental complaint, without any observable organic basis. As with MCS, the medical profession often regarded hysterical patients with skepticism and even hostility, believing that many hysterics were simply emotionally indulgent attention seekers. Nonetheless, the hysterical woman, retiring from the vicissitudes of life to lie palely on a divan in a room with the shades drawn, became fixed as a cultural and literary archetype of the last century.

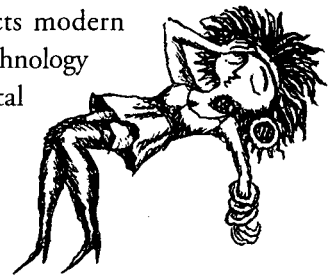
Several scholars have commented on the parallels between the Victorian hysteric and the modern woman suffering from MCS. They view this illness simply as a new label for an old set of symptoms that were also called spinal irritation and neurasthenia in previous times. Historian Edward Shorter, who has published several books on psychosomatic illness, has argued persuasively that the form of imaginary illnesses changes to meet contemporary medical and cultural beliefs. "The unconscious mind," he argues, "desires to be taken seriously and not be ridiculed. It will therefore strive to present symptoms that always seem, to the surrounding culture, legitimate evidence of organic disease." In the nineteenth century, explanations were sought in the configuration of the nervous system and the mysteries of female reproductive organs and sexuality. Today we look for viruses and exposure to toxic chemicals.

No one had ever heard of MCS until about the mid-1980s, when it began to be promoted by a group of alternative medicine practitioners. As publicity about the disease spread, so did its incidence. The multiplicity of symptoms and alleged causes, along with the lack of objective clinical findings consistent with the reported symptoms, make MCS almost impossible to define medically with any precision.

The scientific and medical establishment seems to believe that MCS is largely psychosomatic. Numerous studies have found that MCS patients have a higher incidence of preexisting psychiatric and psychological disorders, leading many researchers to hypothesize that MCS patients are simply projecting their mental and emotional disorders onto the environment. According to Dr. Donald Black, a psychiatrist who has studied MCS patients, "over two-thirds of people diagnosed with environmental illness meet the criteria for the diagnosis of psychiatric disorders."

Another reason for official skepticism is the clinical ecologists' view that MCS has arisen in response to an overload of "industrial chemicals" and "synthetic materials" in the environment. The fixation on synthetic chemicals overlooks the truth that "all natural substances are also chemicals and also just as potentially toxic," notes Dr. William T. Waddell of the University of Louisville. Every substance, including the very air we breathe, can be toxic at sufficiently high levels of exposure. The problem, though, is that MCS patients claim to have experienced symptoms from exposures many orders of magnitude lower than what has been demonstrated empirically to be harmful.

Yet while clinicians may doubt that MCS sufferers truly are allergic to the twentieth century, MCS is very much a twentieth-century disease in key respects. It reflects modern phobias about technology and environmental apocalypse. And it plays into the current vogue of victimhood.



But if hysteria and contemporary conditions like MCS are in fact principally the product of "daggers of the mind," as one professor of medicine has called them, the question remains: why are women disproportionately affected?

Two scientific researchers have suggested that MCS and chronic fatigue syndrome may result from women's conflicting roles in modern society. They see parallels between the changing roles of women at the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some feminists who have studied Victorian hysteria have suggested that it was an understandable response to repressive social conditions and constricted social roles. For example, Elaine Showalter argues in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980*, that, "the nervous women of the fin de siècle were ravenous for a fuller life than their society offered them, famished for the freedom to act and to make real choices." Others have gone so far as to suggest that madness itself is a form of protest against traditional sex

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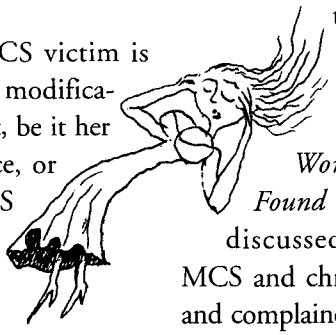
stereotypes. Edward Shorter also has speculated that "there's something about the condition of being female in Western society that puts women at a greater risk" for psychological illness.

Interestingly, a movie released last year called *Safe* seemed to be an update of the "repressive social role" theory. Called a "feminist psychodrama" by some reviewers, the movie tells the story of a suburban Stepford wife who develops MCS. Prior to becoming ill, she has no function in life other than to decorate her house in the San Fernando Valley and endure sex with her husband, whom she dislikes. She begins having progressively more violent physical reactions to odors, including her husband's deodorant, her dry cleaning, and her new couch. Her family doctor finds nothing medically wrong with her and suggests a psychiatrist. Advertorials on television persuade her that she has MCS. Eventually she goes to live in a strange, New Age, chemical-free environment in New Mexico where she hopes to be safe. It's not clear she will be. The New Age compound is run by a creepy male guru who may turn out to be simply another man of the type described by Showalter, Shorter, and others as an exploiter of the mental and emotional distress of women.

Still, if the "repressive social role" theories are even partly true, it is hard to understand why women would be experiencing an outbreak of neo-hysteria in the 1990s or why Western women would suffer more than others. Certainly women in Western industrialized societies enjoy far greater freedom and opportunity today than ever before in history. Unlike a Victorian woman, the housewife in *Safe* has many alternatives available to her, and is hardly hostage to her husband or home.

Whatever the underlying social or cultural circumstances, there clearly is a universal human desire to control others and the flight into illness is one way to do it. The Victorian hysteric was able to dominate her environment completely, subordinating the needs and desires of her husband, relatives and servants to the imperatives of her illness. "A hysterical girl," said Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "is a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people around her."

Similarly, today's MCS victim is able to order wholesale modifications of her environment, be it her classroom, her workplace, or her home. But the MCS sufferer actually enjoys more power than her nineteenth-century predecessor: through political pressure and the threat of litigation, she is able to force others, including strangers, to modify their own behavior and environments. She can prevent coworkers wearing perfume or aftershave. She can disrupt classes or even seek to destroy whole industries.



Activists already have declared that "perfume is going to be the tobacco smoke of tomorrow," and "we want to destroy the fragrance industry." Sonoma State University recently settled, for an undisclosed amount, a claim by a woman who alleged that one of her professors harassed her after she collapsed in spasms — allegedly as a reaction to a fragrance — during one of his lectures. Sufferers of MCS have forced the relocation of classes, the installation of special air filters, even the construction of specially fitted and ventilated rooms. The University of Minnesota School of Social Work was among the first to ban fragrances from its buildings. Administrators at Harvard recently purchased a specially designed desk with a Plexiglas covering for a student who claimed an MCS reaction to printed books and materials.

As a female victim of a disease that is regarded with skepticism by male doctors, the MCS patient also occupies the status of feminist heroine. If a doctor suggests that her ailment is all in her head and that she needs psychiatric treatment, his recommendation is viewed as a political statement rather than a clinical diagnosis.

For example, in an essay in a recent feminist tract entitled *Women with Disabilities: Found Voices*, writer P. Gibson discussed her experience with MCS and chronic fatigue syndrome, and complained that because these are "women's illnesses," she was ignored and misunderstood.

There also have been impassioned Internet discussions about whether the male medical establishment is callous toward women's diseases like MCS. According to one sufferer, "My personal experience not only from the medical community but the general community is that all too often emotions and behaviors that I know to be happening because of chemical exposure are attributed to my being a woman. This feels like a double jeopardy because not only is my illness being denied but also my right as a living being to express my life." In a 1994 speech summarized on the Internet, "eco-anarchist" Wade Collins describes

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MCS as "a form of political domination." He argues that MCS, premenstrual syndrome, and other "female" maladies throughout history are a natural physical expression of male oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Christina Hoff Sommers reported in her book *Who Stole Feminism?* that at one feminist conference she attended, "participants met in groups defined by their grievances and healing needs: .... This year concern extended to 'marginalized' allergy groups. Participants were sent advance notice not to bring perfumes, dry-cleaned clothing, hairspray, or other irritants to the conference out of concern for allergic sisters."

The willingness of feminists to buy into MCS, like their general tendency to portray women as victims of male oppression at every turn, is disturbing and counterproductive. Women have spent most of the twentieth century overcoming the stereotype of the hysterical woman. The attempts by Victorian doctors and scientists to explain the prevalence of hysteria among women of the day were antithetical to any notion of women as strong, competent, independent beings. The female nervous system, they believed, was inherently more sensitive than the male's. Women were at the mercy of their reproductive cycles and smaller brains. In short, they were helpless victims of their own delicate and inferior physiology.

Now we see these same theories being asserted by feminist groups sympathetic to the claims of MCS sufferers, without thought to their consequence. Obviously, a woman cannot be a fighter pilot if she is liable to fall apart emotionally at the onset of a menstrual period. She cannot ever hope to become President if a bad hair day could cause her to hit the nuclear-strike button. She will not be regarded as an equal by her professor if she is believed to be inherently less emotionally stable than her male counterparts. Worse, the very concept of "twentieth-century disease" suggests that women simply cannot cope with the twentieth century. Whatever are they going to do in four years when it's the twenty-first?

The promotion of MCS as a disease also disserves the women who believe they suffer from it. Just because an illness is probably largely psychosomatic in origin does not mean that the patient is not really in pain. If MCS is in fact stress related or related to an underlying psychiatric disorder like anxiety or depression, it needs to be treated straightforwardly as such. Unfortunately, the politics of our time make that an unlikely prescription. ◆

Melinda Ledden Sidak is a Washington lawyer and member of the national advisory board of the Independent Women's Forum.

Shrinking Violets at the Office

Why take a letter when you can take your boss to court? asks *Elizabeth Larson*

Are American men becoming sexual predators on a scale unimaginable even to Anita Hill? The proposition that thousands of male bosses are lurching across their desks at their female underlings, Packwood-style, may surprise many working women in these sexually frosty times. Yet that's exactly what the statistics seem to show.

Since Hill made her accusations against Clarence Thomas five years ago, the number of sexual harassment charges filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has more than doubled: from 6,127 cases in 1990 to 14,420 in 1994. (The EEOC saw a twenty-three percent surge in complaints in the first three weeks following the hearings.) Even before Anita Hill, the number of com-

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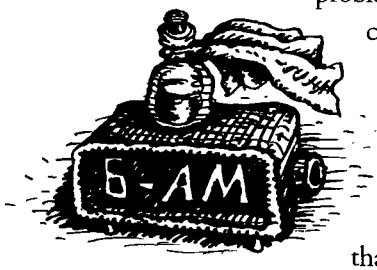
plaints filed with the EEOC had been steadily rising, from just 3,661 cases in 1981.

In response to this alarming trend, American corporations are spending thousands of dollars on seminars to educate their employees about sexual harassment and in-house officers to deal with complaints before they get filed. The truth, though, is that these armies of experts may be fueling the problem rather than containing it. Like the college students persuaded by their feminist sisters that an unwanted kiss is really rape, today's businesswomen are being taught that behavior they once would have considered boorish or inappropriate constitutes actionable sexual harassment. Employers may think they are hiring consultants to protect them from lawsuits, but what is actually being taught is a very different lesson: a wink or a leer can be money in the bank.



The lesson is being learned: The frequency of lawsuits and the size of settlements being awarded seem only to increase as the gravity of the complaints shrink. Thus the real explanation for the EEOC's eye-popping statistics may be less due to lascivious bosses than to a growing number of women, many spurred on by Anita Hill's example, who find it more profitable to litigate than to work.

Brace yourself for the facts of what is believed to be the first sexual harassment case, *Barnes v. Train,* in 1974. A woman working at the Environmental Protection Agency alleged that her job was abolished after she refused to engage in an affair with her boss. A federal district court dismissed the case because, although it agreed that Barnes had suffered discrimination, this discrimination was based not on the fact that she was a woman, but on her refusal to have sex with the director of the agency. For that, the district court said, the law offered no remedy. The decision was reversed on appeal, and Barnes was eventually awarded $18,000 in back pay as damages.

Move forward twenty-one years. Wal-Mart is now appealing a 1995 court ruling that awarded $50 million in punitive damages to a worker in its receiving department who charged that her supervisor liked to joke about her figure.

How did this happen? How did the courts come to regard a tasteless remark as nearly three thousand times more serious than a woman losing her job for refusing sex with her boss?

Like the concept of "date rape," the term "sexual harassment" didn't even exist two decades ago. It joined the American lexicon in the late 1970s with the publication of Lin Farley's *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* (1978) and Catharine MacKinnon's *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979). MacKinnon, the well-known feminist law professor, was largely responsible for convincing the legal community that sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination. In the 1986 case *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, the court upheld MacKinnon's "hostile environment" argument for the first time. This dramatically increased an employer's potential liability because the plaintiff was no longer required to prove she had been subject to a threat (*e.g.*, "Have sex with me or you're fired") — only that she found herself uncomfortable at work, whether because of male comments (*e.g.*, "Nice blouse you have on") or — as in the *Jacksonville Shipyards* case — because of sexy pinups on the wall. As libertarian professor Ellen Frankel Paul has noted, our legal system has gone from punishing behavior that is objectively wrong to that which is subjectively offensive. As the courts' sympathy towards acutely sensitive women has expanded, the average amount awarded in sexual harrassment cases has multiplied to some $250,000 today, according to the trade journal *Business Insurance.*

While relatively few women filing complaints actually get a shot at this legal jackpot (the EEOC ended up litigating only fifty cases in 1990), the cost to businesses attempting to avoid harassment charges is huge. Sexual harassment seminars run by professional consultants and legal advisors range in length from four hours to two days and can cost several thousand dollars each time. And that's just the beginning. As the *9 to 5 Guide to Combatting Sexual Harassment* suggests, "Training should be ongoing, not a onetime session, and presented on paid time." Another guide for employers, *Sexual Harassment on the Job,* recommends that companies have their employees complete a "Sexual Harassment Survey" every six months. And don't forget that every new employee — especially those in management — should go through an awareness and prevention program if the company is to minimize its risk.

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In some areas of the country, these voluntary efforts are required by law. Since 1993, California has required all companies, regardless of size, to notify their employees that sexual harassment is unlawful. The employer must provide examples of what constitutes sexual harassment and make sure it has explained how employees can get in touch with government agencies to deal with their complaints. Connecticut companies with more than fifty workers have been required since 1991 to conduct at least two hours of sexual harassment awareness training for all management; in any office with more than three workers, posters about sexual harassment must be prominently displayed.

No wonder that companies are now purchasing "sexual harassment liability insurance." Invented in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas hearings, premiums for this insurance range from $1,500 to $25,000 annually, depending on various factors, including whether a company has faced harassment charges before. Although fewer than half of the Fortune 500 companies currently have sexual harassment coverage, insurance company officials predict it will become a standard part of most business insurance portfolios over the next few years.

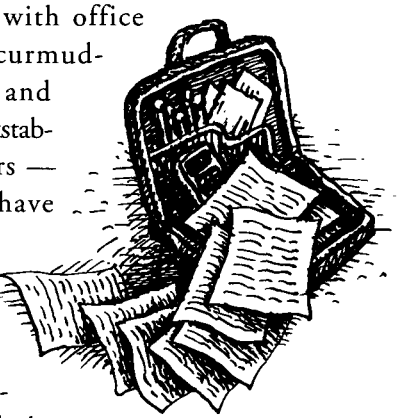
Such coverage would have helped someone like Bill Buckingham, president of Buckingham Computer Services Inc., who fired a woman for incompetence. "I'll get even" were the last words he heard from his disgruntled employee as she left his office. She sued Buckingham and his company, a computer consulting business with some forty employees, for sexual harassment and wrongful discharge.

"Her comment was that I touched her on the back, which I had," Buckingham told reporters. "We're a pretty close-knit company, and there was no question that I had patted people on the back. Nothing sexual. I'd tell people that they were looking sharp today, ask if that was a new dress, stuff like that."

His former employee demanded more than $100,000 to settle the case. Since that figure represented a year's profits, Buckingham tried to fight. He gave up in 1992 after an eighteen-month battle and $25,000 in legal costs.

You could say that the rapid growth of the sexual harassment industry is liberalism's tax on business. The culture of victimization is becoming so embedded in the courts and legislatures that a handful of sexual harassment lawsuits are now seen as representative of the average working woman's lot. Rather than limiting themselves to explanations of the law, experts are teaching women to spot lechery behind every friendly smile. In a sense, this teaching is perhaps a response to that other outcome of sixties' liberalism: the degradation of manners and codes of social behavior. Without clear rules of etiquette, it's no wonder men and women alike need workplace manuals to know how to behave — manuals that unfortunately encourage women to run to the courts at every little slight, real or imagined.

Yet this zeal to punish employers will also punish working women. If women are going to continue to make inroads into the workforce, they will have to deal with office cranks and curmudgeons, louts and Lotharios, backstabbers and boors — just as men have always had to do. It's hard to legislate away unpleasant personalities. In the end, the true backlash against women will not stem from lewd, sexist male bosses but from something far more threatening to the achievements of women: an employer's silent rejection of a woman's job application for fear of trouble. ◆



Elizabeth Larson has written on women's business issues for Investor's Business Daily, American Enterprise *magazine, and the Knight-Ridder Financial News Service.*

Feeling Hysterical?

Why go through the trouble of a lawsuit when you can vent your feelings in a letter to our editor instead? Write to The Women's Quarterly, *2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 500, Arlington, Virginia 22201-3057.*

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Where Childhood Never Comes

Too many inner-city children are used as tickets to entitlements, observes *Camille Harper*

Chicago

The two children locked in the dark gangway looked like tiny prisoners. They clutched the bars of the gate and pressed their faces against them. They were crying. On this winter night, snow was in the air and a biting cold rode the wind. They weren't wearing jackets, just sweaters, and they were bareheaded. The older child was maybe three, the younger, two. Their mother had locked them in the gangway because they disturbed her customers – rough-looking men who hung out at a nearby crack house. Only a few weeks before, the children had been wandering hand in hand across a busy street at night. They were lost, although they were less than a block from their apartment. A neighbor had taken them home. This incident was the reason for their gangway imprisonment.

A short distance from where they lived, six-year-old Beverley (not her name) had already learned how to wander the streets at night without attracting attention. Her mother also made extra money from men and drugs. Beverley was often dirty and ragged, her hair uncombed. Elderly women in her building bathed her and bought her "new" dresses from the thrift shop. One of the women described her hair as "looking as if the rats ate it." When the police finally raided the apartment for prostitution and drugs, the Department of Children and Family Services took custody of the little girl. Within a month, a woman claiming to be her aunt showed up in the neighborhood, wanting to know if the little girl was still in custody. If not, this woman would tell the authorities that the child was now in her (the aunt's) care, and make a claim for more food stamps and money for herself.

The child was still in custody, but the aunt's assessment of the value of children in a criminal culture was quite accurate: they are too often used as chits for entitlement programs. Some of the kids I used to teach at David G. Farragut High School on Chicago's west side would tell me that they didn't need to read or write "and all that crap," because, as they saw it, the way to make it eventually was to have kids, go on welfare, and get apartments of their own. This was their plan, just as you and I might decide to go to college. And for them it was — and still is — a better plan than going to college.

An unwed mother with children is eligible for a large apartment — two to three bedrooms, depending on the number of kids she has — as well as more food stamps per kid, extra food vouchers under the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, and extra medical care. Job training programs open up, offering free child care. But many of these so-called jobs fall into a "give them something to do" category. And unlike jobs in the real world, welfare benefits are guaranteed for eighteen to twenty years, until the kids are grown and have babies of their own so the cycle can start again. As one of my female students put it, "You just keep on having babies so the welfare doesn't run out until you're too old to work."

The only trouble is, the mothers of these kids tend to view them less as their flesh and blood than they do as keys to a bank. There are no requirements on the mother in return for the

Drawings by Ilya Bechkov

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benefits, except making sure that her kids enroll in school and report occasionally for official attendance.

"You can't quit school!" I heard one mother tell her teenage son, a gang member. "I need your money and food stamps."

"I make more money selling drugs!" he yelled back. "Welfare don't pay nothing."

Another woman in my neighborhood would rent out her kids to single people applying for welfare, so they could get the extra cash and larger housing.

And so I see these kids every day on the streets, in this land where childhood never comes. They get their education from anyone willing to give it to them, usually a gang member who can find a use for them. Sometimes the kids seem to be doing nothing more than having fun, but a knowledgeable observer knows better. For example, I watched one ten-year-old pedal his bike around and around the block. His legs pumped furiously, and he had a look of excitement on his face as he raced from corner to corner, slowing only for the turns.

Suddenly he yelled, "5-0! 5-0!"

The drug dealers on the corner scrambled to hide their stashes. A police car, unmarked, cruised slowly down the street. The boy knew the car by the state license plate.

When he or his fellow bikers see me coming down the sidewalk, they yell, "Diana!" which means a civilian who might report the activity. Meanwhile, as bikers circle the blocks, boys and girls who are muling (delivering) drugs line up five and six deep at the doors of crack houses, waiting for distributors to buzz them in for supplies. The bikers and mulers pass by young women who have packed their babies' diapers and strollers with bags of drugs and wheeled them to the corners. Their boyfriends work the streets, calling, "Are you straight?" ("Do you want drugs?") to prospective customers. Among these customers are often women far advanced in pregnancy. For their crack babies, even infancy will be a torment.

There are other activities besides the drug trade for children of the welfare state; shoplifting, for example. I recognized the two boys talking to the store security officer outside the supermarket. I had seen them around my building. The boys were about nine, dressed in gang colors, and obviously truant on this warm fall morning.

The security officer told them, "This is the third time this week I've caught you. If I catch you again, I'll run you in. Now get out of here and don't come back."

The boys strolled off. The smaller boy said, "I guess we messed up for today."

The older boy shook his head and answered, "Nah, c'mon. I know some stores where they don't know me." The boys scampered off.

I later came to know one of the boys. His grandmother, with whom I'd become friendly, knocked on my door and demanded, "Do you think the police have the right to run my boy out of the alley when it's only ten o'clock? That's police brutality!"

"I don't know about police brutality," I answered, "but if he were mine he'd better hope the police kill him before I do. Nothing good happens in those alleys after dark." After that we were less friendly.

But I was not surprised to see the boy again hanging out around the drug corners, especially one that brings back frightening memories.

On a hot summer day some twelve years ago, a visit with a friend ended in the kind of street violence that plagues the corner still. But on this long-ago afternoon, there were no signs of trouble as I said good-bye to my friend and her small sons in front of their building.

The first shot snapped as I turned to go. More shots snapped and a man went down. My friend and I crowded the boys back into the building, pushing as far away from the glass front as we could. Suddenly three boys, all wearing gang colors, rushed in.

The oldest boy, about thirteen, stuffed a revolver in his pants as they shoved past. The boy was grinning. His friends shouted happily, "You got him! You got him!"

One of the boys started jabbing the elevator button and kicking the door. The other boy grabbed the shooter's arm and urged, "C'mon, man, we gotta stash the gun and get you hid!"

He dragged the grinning shooter toward the elevator just as the doors slid open on a crowded cage. The button jabber yelled, "Get off this elevator! We takin' this elevator now!"

Passengers rushed from the elevator. The two boys pulled the shooter inside. One boy urged, "Gimme the piece, man, and I'll stash it!"

The elevator doors slid shut as police began to arrive. My friend, her little boys huddled close, clutched my arm and begged, "Don't say anything to the cops. They [the gang members] will hurt my boys."

She didn't have to ask. I knew about what we call "survival contracts": crime is not reported out of fear of retaliation. If it were, the boys could not have made their getaway. Three years

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ago, this same building was cited in the *Chicago Tribune* as being a role model of subsidized housing for the whole country.

In 1908, Kelly Miller wrote, "Crime has no color, the criminal no race. He is the common enemy of society." Had Miller written that in 1995, he might well have substituted the word "children" for the word "society."

In the early hours of a morning last July, I heard loud shots boom out. I dropped my book and headed for the living room. If the gangs were shooting in the courtyard, the bedroom window could not protect me. There was screaming now. I could make out some of the words.

"Get back! Give him room to breathe!" "Don't move him!"

I dropped into my "foxhole," an angular space formed by a heavy filing cabinet and the outside wall. I peered over the window sill.

A young man lay on the sidewalk. People were milling around. Two young children, neither older than twelve, belly crawled under the security gate in the front courtyard and ran in the entrance of the building. Then they came back out and rejoined the crowd, as if they'd just been wakened. It was 1:55 in the morning. A few other children, who looked in age from eight to ten, all fully dressed even at that hour, crowded around the body. Police, and then an ambulance, drove up. Yellow crime-scene tape was strung out around the area. After awhile, the body was taken away — and the excitement was over for the children.

Such familiarity with and acceptance of crime and violence is not optional, even for very young children. Last November, two Chicago boys, now ten and eleven, were sentenced to a maximum of ten years in a youth home after they were convicted of dropping a five-year-old out the fourteenth-storey window of a public high rise. Their reason for doing this, they said, was that the five-year-old would not steal candy for them. And several years ago, a ten-year-old boy selling drugs in front of my building thought it would be funny to sell LSD instead of crack cocaine to a mental patient. The patient, who was from a nearby halfway house, had a bad trip, locked himself in the elevator housing on the roof of his building, and finally jumped to his death.

Both gang members and the ten-year-old took advantage of the crowd to sell more drugs.

Some kids still pretend that they're getting an education that might one day get them out of this world. Recently a gang member bragged to me that he was a sophomore at a local high school, and had scored a "B" in one of his classes. Yet he read the brand name on my shirt as "48." The brand name does not have a single number in it. Other children show a growing awareness that what they have been taught might not help them to lead productive, honest lives. One young teenage girl asked me if it were too late to catch up with the learning she had missed. I told her it is never too late to learn, but I am very much afraid that crack cocaine, husbandless childbearing, and government dependency are all far more likely to determine her future than education. She lives in a neighborhood where so many wrong turns have already been made. And there will be much encouragement to keep turning the wrong way.

One day recently, as I was returning from the store, I saw a little boy of about four clutching the bars of a parking lot fence and crying. Drug gangs were brazenly working the streets and parking lot all around him. A large woman came barreling down on the boy. She was yelling, "You better have a f——— good reason for crying, or I'm gonna beat your f——— a—."

The little boy did not cry harder — large tears and a soft snuffle were all he had left in him — nor did he try to run away. He just kept his eyes fixed on some point beyond the parking lot's bars. Maybe he just wished he could pass through those bars into another world. Or maybe, like a tiny Socrates, he simply accepted his fate.

In my neighborhood, clutching bars is practice for the future. ◆

Camille Harper publishes the Strobe, *a community newsletter. She also serves on the advisory council of Project 21, sponsored by the National Center for Public Policy Research in Washington.*

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The Token Man

But Can She Make a Nice *Kuggel*?

David Klinghoffer suggests the modern bachelor learn dating techniques from Orthodox Jews

Two theories about men like me in our late twenties and early thirties try to explain why we're getting married ten or more years later than our fathers did (if we do at all). The theory of twentysomething malaise states that since we're not all millionaires with plush suburban homes like our sixty-year-old parents, we are too poor to get married. The other theory, held by single women, is that we are all so selfish that we can't bear the idea of commitment. Both theories are false.

I realized this one Sunday morning visiting my friend Henry, who with some pals had rented a beach house in West Hampton. We were all reading the *New York Times* with great interest. The sports pages? "Week in Review"? No. We successful Manhattan twenty- and thirty-somethings were sitting around piningly reading the marriage announcements.

The men I know are dying to get married; they just don't know how. Let me recommend the Orthodox route. It overturns at least one of the two roadblocks to modern marriage.

Though I grew up a secular Jew, over the past ten years I've evolved into an Orthodox one. The transition took so long because it was hard to give up habits learned from birth. One of the habits I have had to get used to is Orthodox dating.

According to my previous way of thinking, dating meant the process of taking women out for dinners, movies, etc., in order to lure them into bed. Only afterwards did you consider thinking about talking about thinking about living together. Such a relationship could last anywhere from two hours to five years. A guy I know claims to have read that the typical man throughout history has had to get to know some four hundred women, sexually or casually (or both), before settling on his life's love. If every woman a modern man dates counts as one of those four hundred, it's going to take him a while to find his wife.

Orthodox men prefer a more streamlined approach because: 1) they consider marriage the sole way to join, as a rabbi I know puts it, "the company of civilized men"; and 2) thanks to some really inconvenient commandments from that arch-spoilsport, God, they can't have premarital sex or even, if you want to be strict about it, touch a woman to whom they're not married. Anyone with a sex drive running on a full tank of gas had better get married, fast.

So what you do is date the way my father and grandfather did. By the end of no more than five dates, if you find that you are physically attracted to a woman but unwilling to marry her, you break it off. And so you proceed through your four hundred at a clip. This sounds coldhearted, and it requires discipline of a kind I am still trying to perfect, but it works.

Or should work. As you may have guessed, I am not yet married. The reason for this says as much about modern women and men as about me. For as I mentioned, there is another barrier blocking the way to modern marriage. It is that I'm not sure modern women want families as much as men do. How can you get married or, at any rate, how can you be a mother if you are pursuing a career as aggressively as your husband? At the same time, an ambitious man would feel vaguely ashamed to marry a woman who is not similarly ambitious.

Alas, the Orthodox dating method cannot resolve this conflict. It may be that, as a male friend who's a Reform Jew keeps telling me, I want something impossible in my wife: a man's mind and a woman's soul. If he's right, I guess I would rather marry a woman's mind and a woman's soul than what he is probably going to end up with: a man's mind with a man's soul.

David Klinghoffer is literary editor of National Review.

"Jewish Restaurant in Brick Lane" by Pearl Binder

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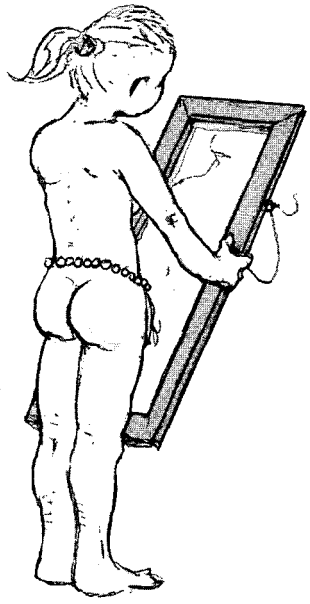
Why Your Daughter Wants Her Navel Pierced

Olivia Vlahos can explain it, if you can't



Not too long ago, CNN news explored a new sort of beauty treatment. I watched as a blonde young woman, her hair fashionably frizzed, submitted her bare midriff to a branding knife.

A branding knife! The usually unflappable CNN reporter could not repress a gasp at the hiss of searing flesh. From the brandee — Marylou or Betty Sue, something like that — not a sound. She was, after all, being beautified, her body redesigned, decorated to reflect the tastes of a generation bored with the tattoo. As for the pain — so what? A small price to pay for chic.

I was suddenly reminded of a similar scene caught by the camera in Central Africa some thirty years ago. It was featured in a documentary film which my anthropology students used to watch. Entitled *Bakuba*, the film described life among a people imbued, as the narrator put it, with "a passion for decoration." Their unique geometric designs, related to their sacred king, were applied to wooden sculpture, to beadwork, to raffia mats, and to the human skin.

Riveted with horror, my students watched the Kuba artist (whose services were not cheap) cut typical designs on her client's bare back, stanching the blood flow with ordinary dirt. Some shuddered involuntarily. Some squealed. Not a few refused outright to watch. Never mind that the woman being beautified neither flinched nor cried out. Never mind that the results of countless previous operations marched in elegant, bumpy scars over her body from neck to pubic region. "Barbaric!" was invariably the verdict of the class. "How could a person do something like that?" they demanded.

But here on my television screen were young women not unlike my students, children of today's affluent, up-to-date, technologically with-it culture, submitting to beauty treatments no less disfiguring, no less "barbaric" than those of the Kuba. And, in a society so afraid of pain that dentists routinely offer tranquilizers to patients fearful of an ordinary cleaning, here were pain seekers courting the sensations of a severe burn — and paying for the privilege.

Well, why not? That has to be the response of anyone who takes the long view of human experience. The urge to redesign, retool, complete what nature has bestowed, to advertise on the body the wishes of the soul or the conventions of society has been as much a marker of our species as the urge to speak.

The use of paint by early humans can be traced in archaeological sites dating back 400,000 years or more. And since the paints in question often appear as roughly shaped "crayons," much rubbed on one end, we can assume that they were probably applied to the only surface readily available at the time: the human skin. No painted rocks of similar antiquity exist to tell us otherwise.

What prompted those ancient ancestors of ours to paint themselves? Who can explain the origin of their body art? One might begin by imagining the sort of world they inhabited. It was a world dominated by animals larger and more powerful than the puny, scurrying humans who feasted on the kills of great beasts. Would not these clever, watchful beings seek to distinguish themselves from — elevate themselves over — their predators and sometime prey?

Drawings by Charles Jaffé

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Life at the bare edge of survival is everywhere illumined by valiant attempts to achieve symbolic separation from nature. How? By making rules. Rules about relationships and worship. Rules about eating, sleeping, and sex. Animals cannot choose to abstain when the season of rut draws near, but humans can. They can command the body. They can deny the body. They can decorate the body with colors and markings holding sacred significance. Humans at the simplest levels of existence can separate themselves from nature through renunciation, religion, and art.

Most tattoo enthusiasts have prescribed distinctions between the tattoos borne by the two sexes. For Ainu women of the northernmost Japanese island, the tattoo was once like a wedding band, applied after marriage to hands, brow, and lips. The dutiful woman, so the markings seemed to proclaim, worked only for her husband, thought only of him, spoke only to him. The last injunction required lip markings absolutely unique in the annals of tattoo. A sort of larger mouth, curled in a permanent smile, was made to surround the woman's natural lips.

It may be that the Japanese, who were not aboriginal on these islands, picked up tattooing from the Caucasoid and very hirsute Ainu, native to the region. Despising the Ainu, they used the tattoo to brand a traitor with shame. By the sixteenth century, however, meanings had changed. Japanese prostitutes were tattooing the names of favored clients on their thighs. And when sumptuary laws went into effect, forbidding expensive clothing to the business classes, the ardent social climber could hide under his somber tradesman's gear a tattooed body as elegant and costly as a brocaded gown. Until recently the tattoo has been an occupational emblem for Japanese firemen, carpenters, and gangsters. And always an exquisite art form.

The art form, together with its occupational connections, has been adopted in this country by motorcycle clubs whose members display their illustrated bodies in the pages of their own magazines. Some cycling "mamas" go the Ainu woman one better, tattooing on the inner membrane of their lower lips the obscenity currently in vogue. In any altercation, the woman so tattooed can deliver the ultimate insult by simply flashing a lip.

True body sculpture, however, requires use of the knife — for incision or excision — and often the removal of body parts. Never those essential to the business of life, of course, but the few expendables that can be comfortably sacrificed. Sacrificed for what? For mourning, usually, or for rituals of puberty. On the death of close male relatives, young girls of the New Guinea highlands once were forced to give up fingers. A traditional woman of the North American Plains — a Cheyenne or Dakota — might do likewise so that the Powers might spare her warrior brother in battle.

So ancient and widespread is the practice of circumcision (only Eurasians appear to have been exempt and not all of them) that one would be hard pressed to speculate about origins. Some Arabian tribes were said to elaborate circumcision into a supreme test of courage, one through which not all would live. Deferred until the young man was about to marry, the Arabian operation involved a partial flaying alive, the skin being peeled away from the stomach, pelvis, penis, scrotum, and inner legs. The prospective bride was invited to witness the ordeal and was privileged to refuse the match if her intended so much as flinched. Such rites were later forbidden by the code of Islam, which nevertheless insisted, "Circumcision is an ordinance for men and honorable for women."

Female circumcision requires, at minimum, the removal of the clitoris,

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sometimes the labia as well. "If this organ is not removed," say the Dogon, a hill people of modern Mali, "a woman will forever be partly male, just as the man with prepuce intact will be partly female." Surgical intervention is thought necessary to resolve the sexual ambivalence which a thoughtless nature has failed to edit.

Traditional Somali of the African Horn are less concerned with ambivalence than with defense. They seek in clitoridectomy to achieve the padlock a neglectful nature has failed to provide. How else can a girl's virginity be safeguarded? Not so long ago it was customary (and perhaps still is) to force a little girl of six or seven to undergo an operation during which the clitoris and portions of her external genitalia were removed. What remained was then neatly stitched with thorns until the vaginal opening was welded nearly shut. At marriage a second operation partially reopened the channel, which was again partially closed after the birth of a baby.

The practice of clitoridectomy has sparked a global controversy, one which surfaced quite recently in Egypt, now the most modern of Islamic societies. An article in a March, 1995, issue of the *Wall Street Journal* described the flap that ensued after the film of a clitoridectomy performed at home was shown on CNN. Upholders of the practice see it as the ultimate protection of women from the dangerous stimulations of the modern world. All that riding around in buses, they say, all that working in offices is surely enough to lead astray young women who are uncircumcised and therefore vulnerable.

We decry the practice, understandably. Surgical alterations in the Western world are designed to enhance and emphasize sexuality — not to restrain it. But they also resemble ancient practices in some ways. Since face lifts, breast implants, and liposuction are expensive procedures requiring medical professionals and sterile environments, they are available only to the well-off and thus constitute beauty markers of class.

Among less exalted clients, the needle, not the knife, is the surgical instrument of choice. And the practitioner? Anyone who hangs out a shingle and has the nerve to do the job. Like the knife, the needle can be used to enhance sexual attractiveness. Many a woman has found in the strategically placed tattoo a wonderful come-on. The needle is also a puncturing device, providing holes from which to hang trinkets of various sizes, shapes, and degrees of sparkle. Those meant primarily for sexual titillation are normally hidden from public view. The devotee of X-rated films, however, is familiar with the beringed nipples, navels, and penises of reigning porn stars.

Ordinary citizens going about their everyday business have become accustomed to seeing other sorts of ornaments on the faces of passersby, dangling conspicuously from noses, lips, eyebrows, and ears, where they sometimes march all around the rim.

Similar trinkets have traditionally marked the faces of people living in simple settings, isolated from the modern world. Is it solidarity with the primitive that today's decorated dandies seek to proclaim by way of their disfigurements? Is it imitation of tribal custom they have in mind? If so, it is the look they have achieved, not the meanings that impelled the look. For none of the following scenarios of body alteration carry resonance today:

- "Let's have a baby-blacking," say the nomadic Caingang of southeastern Brazil. "Let's make a child." This means blackening the father and piercing baby's lower lip.
- "If we don't pierce baby's ear," say the Bella Coola of the north Pacific Coast, "he won't live long."
- "With pierced ears the baby will be proof against lightning," say the Arapaho.
- "The girl with a pierced lip is ready for marriage," say the Jivaro who once hunted heads.
- "The girl with a pierced left nostril is married," says the Hindu and goes on to prove it with a nose ring of such heavy gold, so encrusted with gems, that it must be anchored to the ear with a golden chain.
- "Piercing our nasal septums makes us look fierce," say the Fijians – or did when war was still a favorite sport.
- "Piercing our noses makes us men," say old-time warriors of New Guinea who still ply their arrows from time to time.

One cannot locate a common theme or purpose amid today's bewildering assortment of baubles and beads. Once upon a time, the Western male with one pierced ear was almost certainly a pirate or, at least, a seaman of some sort. Not too many years ago, the pierced male ear denoted membership in the gay community. No more. Facial perforations today are not even sex segregated. They do not signify solidarity with other members of a clan, class, or religion. They do not identify occupation. Is facial perforation just another passing craze, like flat-top haircuts or baggy pants? If so, it is one that will not easily be forgotten. Hair grows out and clothes can be

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discarded, but holes drilled in the anatomy are permanent fixtures.

Why then the current popularity of pain and disfigurement?

"I am making a fashion statement," explained a New Jersey policeman, fingering the conspicuous bauble in his ear. That bauble had won the attention of a television reporter and an appearance on the evening news. Was he right?

Unlike the temporary social seizures we call crazes, fashion is longer lasting and pervasive. It is the visible symbol in dress and decoration, in architecture and art that marks a period, a people, a place. Fashion is unitary, setting standards people generally strive to reach. Fashion may also characterize a smaller segment of society, uniting its members in standards designed to defy the norms of polite society and outrage its sensibilities.

Was the policeman's earring intended to outrage and defy? If so, it failed in its purpose. Asked by the reporter whether they found a decorated cop shocking, local townsfolk said no. As long as he did his job. Well, of course. Everybody knows it is bad form these days to be shocked by appearance. People, after all, must be allowed to express themselves. But wait. If anything goes, can there truly be fashion?

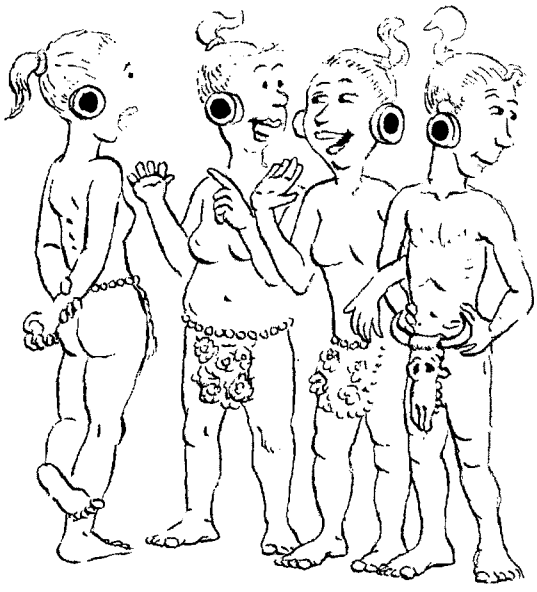
Not too long ago there were still standards of dress as there were standards of deportment, and one took strength from the other. For afternoon and evening parties, and other grand occasions, there was prescribed attire. One could modify the prescription but not abandon it altogether. The various sports had their own uniforms, and one displayed skin only at the beach. One dressed for business in sober garb, if not a uniform, to denote the seriousness of the work at hand. Today nobody knows quite what to wear when, and how to behave after arrival, for the guidelines of dress and deportment have vanished. Haute couture, which perplexingly mingles bygone styles with modern messages, is not so haute anymore. "Wear what you want when you want." That seems to be the message of the fashion mavens.

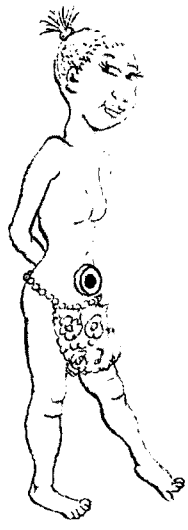
Yet anarchy in fashion reflects anarchy in culture. Rules, which once ordered human relationships and made of marriage, home, and work the ultimate goals in life, have now lost their punch. One is invited to make up life's scenarios from scratch. Those who are bright, enterprising, and confident find it easy to thread their way through a thicket of alternatives. So do those who remember the old rules and insist on abiding by them. But what about the others? What about those whose human attachments are few, who are without strong ties to work or church? What about those with nothing to stand out from or belong to? What meanings and beliefs give purpose to their lives?

When all else fails, one verity remains. It is the body that we bring with us into the world and leave behind when we die. We may have few choices in life and no importance in the great scheme of things, but the body is still our own to use and command. Its muscles can be developed to exaggerated proportions. It can be made to endure prolonged exercise or sleeplessness or cold. It can be thinned through voluntary starvation. It can be sculpted, engraved, disfigured, and adorned.

Suppressing pain gives worth, and ornament achieved with pain makes worth visible. "Look at me! Look at me!" cries the person so adorned. "I am somebody. And I have some body to prove it!"

Although she doesn't know it, that is why Marylou wants to be branded. It gives her life meaning for the moment. And, for the moment, that may be meaning enough. ◆





Olivia Vlahos is a retired professor of anthropology and the author of seven books including Body, the Ultimate Symbol *(Lippincott: 1979), from which this essay was adapted.*

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It Doesn't Take A Village Idiot

Just a bit of modesty. *Zofia Smardz* defends the traditional role of First Lady

It certainly is an old-fashioned role for a woman. It requires no cleaning or cooking, but it does involve running a large house and sometimes greeting one's husband with a martini at the end of his busy day. It assumes that in importance and status a woman will be at all times secondary to her husband. And it takes for granted that this woman will be cheerful and uncomplaining about her position, fully satisfied with her domestic duties.

It is no wonder then that the prospect of being First Lady is one that modern, career-driven wives find difficult to stomach. Hillary Clinton's misfired efforts to expand the First Lady's role into the policy-making arena have been followed by Elizabeth Dole's landmark announcement that she would keep her job as president of the American Red Cross if her husband managed to win the White House. Mrs. Dole's implied snub of the job as First Lady — she did not, after all, spend all those years in Washington clawing her way up to Cabinet rank just to stand humbly at her husband's side — was a startling one for a Republican to make.

But no one was apparently offended. Indeed, Mrs. Dole's announcement was greeted by many pundits as an inevitable development of the role of First Lady. Mrs. Dole went on to repeat her promise on the stump in a clear attempt to woo working women who similarly might view a stay-at-home First Lady as hopelessly retrograde. Her intention to keep her day job could also be read as sending a reassuring signal to all those who have found Mrs. Clinton's behavior unsettling. Mrs. Dole was indicating that she would be busy with her own career, and would have no interest in meddling in the policies and politics of the White House. In this way, she would go one better than Mrs. Clinton and perfectly embody modern female aspiration: her self-image and sense of importance would not at all rely upon the status of her husband.

A First Lady busy with her own career, however, raises lots of other prospects, too, many of them equally unsettling. It took no time at all for the media to begin digging into Elizabeth Dole's personal finances and her arrangements with the Red Cross, in search of potential irregularities or conflicts of interest — and coming up with more than a few questions. How would the Red Cross — or any other employer — deal with the relentless scrutiny the presence of a presidential spouse would invite? What happens to security in the blood banks, or

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a national blood drive, when the President's wife is the woman in charge? Will the President have to call the First Lady to ask whether she can make it back from the disaster site in Azerbaijan in time for a state dinner?

More unsettling, though, is the larger issue raised by the examples of Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Dole: both seem to be saying that being a First Lady is not worth a smart woman's time or talent. And that, ultimately, is a snub not only to all the First Ladies who have gone before, but to the American public itself.

Viewed from the car pool lane, after all, the First Ladyship looks like a dream job, the best job for a woman in all America, barring the day when a woman becomes the Chief Executive herself. It's a position of unique privilege, prominence, and, yes, power, to which only a handful of women ever have the opportunity to accede.

For all the difficulties attendant upon it — the fishbowl existence, the fierce media spotlight, the roller-coaster ride of public praise and criticism — the role offers rewards unattainable to most American women. It's hard to imagine how any job, however demanding or important, could compete with hosting state leaders from Japan or Israel or Russia, or representing the United States abroad, or bringing one's personal influence to bear on a campaign for children's welfare, or against illiteracy or drugs, or any number of other worthy causes. It's hard to see how any one job could be more important than serving one's country, even in the part of second fiddle. (The First Lady also gets to be mistress of the White House, a fantasy for which I for one would willingly give up a few years of privacy.)

The most successful First Ladies have always been those who embraced their position, plumbed its potential, and set to fiddling exuberantly for all they were worth. Lucy Hayes, the first First Lady to be regularly addressed by that title, considered her life in the White House to be a joy and went about it in that spirit. Eleanor Roosevelt seized upon the opportunity to extend compassion from the executive mansion. When John Adams was elected president, his wife Abigail gladly relinquished running their farm in Massachusetts in order to fulfill her duties as his "helpmeet." Later in life, asked if she regretted all the sacrifices her husband's political career had demanded, she said no, "I feel a pleasure in being able to sacrifice my selfish passions to the general good."

A woman like Elizabeth Dole, who has been a Washington supercrat for most of her career, is hardly at a stage of life where proving herself professionally is a major goal, or where taking off four to eight years would be detrimental to her future career pursuits (as if having been First Lady could ever be detrimental to any woman's future career pursuits).

Mrs. Dole's promise to maintain an outside profession only promotes the view that the East Wing and its offices should serve as another platform for asserting a feminist vision of women's role in society. And it has the ring of a politically correct appeal to baby boomer careerism unashamed to place the pursuit of personal satisfaction ahead of less lucrative public concerns.

At a time when the whole country could use another look at the old-fashioned notion of personal sacrifice for the general and future good, who better than the First Lady to illuminate it for us? ◆

Zofia Smardz is a former correspondent for Newsweek.

Yes, that *is* what I'd do, actually...

Our readers may recall Deborah Weiss' memorable account of litigating a case for child support, only to discover the father in question was now a mother, thanks to a sex change operation paid for by Medicaid (Winter 1996). Weiss' story was subsequently reprinted in the Providence Journal-Bulletin. *The newspaper then published an anguished response from a transsexual reader who had also received a sex change courtesy of Medicaid. Mr./Miss R. Scott Gerdes admitted that "at first I felt guilty that taxpayers were footing the bills," but insisted, "I was not a welfare moocher. And being in my early thirties, I have many years left in which to pay taxes back to this state and this country." After all, he continued, "just try to imagine waking up one morning only to find that you have five o'clock shadow, a bosomless chest, and a penis — but in your mind you knew that you were still a woman.... What would you do? Would you put on a suit and tie and say, 'Well, I must be a man cuz my body tells me so?'"* ◆

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Dispatch

Summertime Cinderellas

The dreams of Brazil's prostitutes are exploited as much by their feminist social workers as their foreign johns, reports *Isabel Vincent*

Recife, Brazil

Mariazinha is a drug user. An eighteen-year-old prostitute who works the beach of this sun-drenched resort city on Brazil's northeastern coast, Mariazinha also has AIDS and few prospects for a better life. But to the feminist social workers who wander Recife's tropical beaches in search of misery, Mariazinha is also something of a star. In international-social-worker-speak she is one of the most pathetic victims of "sexual and economic imperialism," and her story is available to foreign journalists. For a price.

For fifty dollars per hour, a group of social workers offered to take me on a tour of Recife's discotheques and brothels where an estimated three thousand young prostitutes meet their clients — mostly Germans and Italians, known here as "sex tourists." They fly in from Europe on cheap flights to have sex with women like Mariazinha, who live in the sprawling dirt-poor clusters of tin and plywood lean-tos on the outskirts of Recife. At the end of our tour, the social workers promised me an interview with Mariazinha.

"You want to hear about what really goes on in the sex trade in this country, then you'll have to talk to Mariazinha," said Marcia Dangremon, president of

Coletivo Mulher Vida — Portuguese for Women's Life Collective — when I interviewed her at the decaying, white-washed colonial villa where she lives and works. The Coletivo is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that relies on sympathy and donations from abroad for much of its funding.

During our first — and, in the end, only — discussion, Dangremon and her associate, Ceci Prestrello, told me horror stories about the prostitutes, some as young as thirteen, who "service" the foreign tourists. These girls, they said, are forced into prostitution because it is the only way for them to earn a living in one of the country's most impoverished and backward regions. The majority of the young prostitutes are from broken homes, and suffer sexual abuse by their parents — only to experience further abuse from their clients.

According to the Coletivo, the men who travel from Europe and North America sexually exploit the young girls in the same way that colonial powers and multinational corporations once plundered South America's natural resources. Some of the prostitutes don't even charge money for their services, Dangremon said, in the hope that the foreign "johns" will marry them and take them away from their life of poverty. This is in some ways the biggest tragedy, according to the workers of the Coletivo: this cruel exploitation of the naive dreams of the "summertime Cinderellas," as they are known.

"The media creates false views and false expectations," Prestrello told me angrily. "In ads in the mainstream media everyone is beautiful and blonde and has a lot of money. These girls think that if they hook up with a foreigner, he will turn her into a princess and take her away to a world of mass consumption."

To educate the prostitutes, the Coletivo focuses on language training so that "the girls won't get duped by the Germans," who make up the bulk of the sex tourists in the Brazilian northeast. "In some cases, many of the prostitutes in the Coletivo's programs learn to speak German before they learn to read and write," added Dangremon. "We teach them survival skills."

But survival for what? In the Coletivo's German language workshops, the prostitutes also learn how to fulfill German visa requirements just in case

Drawing by Charles Jaffé

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their boyfriends send for them from Germany. In contrast, many of the other NGOs in the city offer workshops in sewing and hairstyling to prostitutes who want to change their line of work. Brazil's most influential daily, *O Globo*, even accused the Coletivo of setting up a school to create better prostitutes rather than former ones. But Dangremon and the members of the Coletivo say they do not think such an approach is realistic because women in Recife can earn much more working as prostitutes than as hairdressers or seamstresses.

"A lot of women who we referred to the other NGOs got disillusioned and ended up back on the streets where they earn a much better living," Dangremon replied. "We work with the women who want to be on the street. We respect their choice and we teach them about their rights as women."

But this realism also reflects another fact about prostitute life in Brazil. For despite efforts of the Coletivo to educate them of their rights, the prostitutes don't usually consider themselves on the losing end of the bargains they make with their clients.

Dangremon's brand of militant feminism is a tough sell in a place like Brazil. Most of the women whom I interviewed during my four-year sojourn there as a foreign correspondent equated feminists with crazed, man-hating North American women. This was true whether they came from shantytowns and worked the beaches of Recife, or were employed at more respectable jobs in Sao Paulo's glistening office towers. Throughout most of Latin America, women tend to be independent and tough-minded, yet proud of their femininity. Whenever I asked if they considered themselves feminists, I was always met with a suspicious stare and an unequivocal "No, I don't hate men."

The women at the Coletivo proved to be the rare exception. Perhaps this was why the prostitutes the women at the Coletivo were eager for me to meet proved less than willing to donate their time, as it were, to the cause. "Mariazinha will tell you terrible stories that will give you goosebumps," promised Dangremon. "But she has to get something out of it, too. And it's going to cost you."

There was some perverse logic to the argument, but I couldn't stomach the idea of buying my way into this theater of misery. The Coletivo, further, also strongly suggested that I allow them to set up all my interviews with the prostitutes, and to accompany me and a photographer to Recife's biggest sex spots.

When I refused this arrangement, members of the Coletivo warned many of the two hundred or so prostitutes registered in their workshops not to talk to me or my photographer. On at least two occasions when we arrived at the Eclipse, one of the city's most popular meeting spots, none of the women would agree to be interviewed.

"The Coletivo said you are out to exploit us," said Sonia, a seventeen-year-old mulatta prostitute, dressed in a hip-hugging neon pink micro mini and a Madonna-style black bustier. "And don't you dare take my picture or I'll sue you."

Still, my photographer and I eventually managed to speak to prostitutes and collect information unfettered by the Coletivo's "help." Unsurprisingly, I found that the situation was much less dire and stark than Dangremon and her sisters would have had us believe. In fact, most of the women we spoke to didn't consider themselves passive victims. Many spoke fondly of the foreign men, who, they said, treated them with much more respect than their macho Brazilian boyfriends. Others spoke well of the experience of earning enough money as prostitutes to be able to buy their families a house with electricity and running water. At the city's international airport, we met women tearfully saying good-bye to their summertime princes only to bolt across to the arrivals level to meet a new group of men.

Such was the case with thirty-year-old Dalcione Buarque da Silva, who was at the airport to say good-bye to Gunther, her German boyfriend of the last two weeks. Although she claimed to be in love with him and hoped to marry him, she said she had to earn a living while he was back in Germany. That same night she was back at the Eclipse, gyrating under the disco lights and eyeing the other foreign men. "I have a lot of expenses," she explained to me as her gaze searched the crowd for another john. "This is the only way that I can put my two children through school and give my parents a better life." She told me that with the money she earned as a prostitute, her elderly parents were able to exchange their scrap wood lean-to for a brick house.

It was true that the photographer and I documented many sad cases of abuse. We heard chilling stories from young women who had married their foreign Prince Charmings and were swept away to Europe and North America only to be mistreated by their new husbands. But we were surprised by the number of stories that had happy endings — women whose lives had been dramatically improved by

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their liaisons. They arrived in Recife on weekly charters with their European husbands, juggling newborn babies and suitcases full of consumer products and medicine for their impoverished families.

As for the johns themselves, they may not have been gentlemen exactly; very rarely, either, were they the brutish cartoons depicted by the Coletivo. We met truck drivers from Germany and businessmen from the United States who claimed they headed to Recife every year for sex because they were spooked by North American and European women. "These days you can't even ask a girl out on a date in the States without getting slapped with a sexual harassment suit," complained a tourist from Minneapolis.

On my last day in Recife, I received a telephone call from Dangremon at my hotel. She sounded angry that I had gone out and done my own research without the cooperation of the Coletivo. "You should have waited to meet Mariazinha," she said.

"Hold on there just a minute," I said, momentarily taken aback at my own boldness. "Just who is prostituting whom?"

Dangremon seemed surprised by the question. Which is probably why I never did get to meet Mariazinha. I'm wondering if she exists. ◆

Isabel Vincent is the author of See No Evil: The Strange Case of Christine Lamont and David Spencer *(Reed Books Canada: 1995). She was Latin American correspondent for the Toronto* Globe & Mail, *where she currently works as a reporter.*

In the New Yorker*'s recent special issue on women the editors — after consultation with guest editor and TV comedienne Roseanne — introduced their readers to what they imagined to be a fascinating new political movement: ideological feminism. It's hard to choose which of the very special articles the issue contained was the most perfectly appropriate to its subject. Was it feminist punster Mary Daly describing her "startling communication from a clover blossom" one day — a communication so compelling that it launched her in her life's mission as a "radical feminist pirate"? A writer named Daphne Merkin admitting that despite being an independent sort of gal, she "cannot remember a time when I didn't think about being spanked as a sexually gratifying act, didn't fantasize about being reduced to a craven object of desire by a firm male hand"? Or was it Jane Kramer's rambling memoir of her life as a seventies feminist, passing along such startling communications as, "The women who got together...in Manhattan had one thing in common besides their sex and their politics and their privilege: at one time or another, they had all felt this damage, this same shattering invisibility."*

So there is American womanhood, or womynhood, near the dawn of a new century, at least as the bluestockings at the New Yorker *would see it. True, a vague sense that their new doctrine may strike the magazine's readers as — to put it mildly — dated may explain why Dorothy Wickenden, the magazine's executive editor, felt obliged to write a surprisingly apologetic introduction to the issue: "Sisterhood is powerful;...so is conservatism, which, with some unintended help from the sillier reaches of academe, has half-succeeded in turning 'feminism' into a much mocked anachronism, a mood ring left over from the bell-bottom epoch." With more help from the sillier reaches of the* New Yorker, *we might yet fully succeed.*

Here are some cutting-edge articles we look forward to reading in future "special" issues:

✔ The* Nation*'s Katha Pollitt on Bolshevism: the Wave of the Future?

✔ Richard Avedon photographs the new hoop skirts from the House of Worth.

✔ Dave Marsh asks, Can Four Mopheads from Liverpool Sell Records in America?

✔ Sidney Blumenthal on how William Jennings Bryan can beat McKinley in '96.

✔ James Wolcott reviews the incomprehensible new novel from James Joyce. ◆

Memo to Tina Brown

How about a special edition on animal rights edited by Jim Carrey?

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One last observation . . .

Calling Henry Higgins

All she wants to be is a proper lady but she ain't going to learn it from this professor, writes *Lynne V. Cheney*

A FEMINIST PROFESSOR teaching at the University of Wisconsin listed some of the objections that students had made to feminist teaching in composition and introduction to literature sections. Wrote one student, "I feel this course was dominated and overpowered by feminist doctrines and ideals." Wrote another, "Feminism is an important issue in society — but a very controversial one. It needs to be confronted on a personal basis, not in the classroom. I didn't appreciate feminist comments on papers or expressed about work."

The professor quoting these comments did not accord them any legitimacy. She did not ask whether it might be reasonable for a student to object when a course that is supposed to be about how to write is turned into a course on overcoming patriarchy. To her, the complaints were examples of what feminists have to put up with in the classroom. They were a starting point for discussing the "resistance" that must be overcome "in order to get our students to identify with the political agenda of feminism."

A professor from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, who used a freshman writing course to teach, as she put it, "leftist politics" and "feminist thought," found herself the subject of a complaint from a young woman named Minnie, whom the professor described as "a young working-class woman from Puerto Rico." What Minnie wanted was to learn how to write. She wanted model essays to pattern her work after; she wanted the professor to correct her papers and tell her how to write better; and when these things did not happen, she complained to the writing director.

As the professor described Minnie's grievance: "She made it clear that...notions of gender politics, notions of student empowerment did not touch her need for the proper style, the proper accent, the Doolittle makeover she had signed up for. It was not that Minnie did or did not wish to embrace her race and her class; it was that she wished to define them otherwise. That is, to define herself as American, middle-class, conservative, genderless: the student, the worker, the citizen.

"Minnie's tuition dollar," the professor concluded, "is buying plastic surgery, not literacy." ◆

Lynne V. Cheney is the author of Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense — and What We Can Do About It *(Simon & Schuster: 1995) from which this article is excerpted. Mrs. Cheney serves on the board of directors of the Independent Women's Forum.*

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"Impressively accomplished"

–*the* Washington Post's *Megan Rosenfeld on the IWF*

FOR THE PAST three years, the Independent Women's Forum has been taking on the old establishment of feminist organizations — and winning. "The IWF has a profile almost unheard of for a group that is the new kid on the block," writes the *Boston Globe*. "In the marketplace of ideas, from the national news media all the way down to local radio, the IWF has shown its real strength.... [The] IWF is well on its way to becoming the foremost media nemesis of the feminist movement."

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